

Introduction to Liberian English:

Liberian English is quite distinct from British or American usage. It has some archaic American expressions held over from the “pioneers” of the 1800s (like “vexed” for angry), but also has some British and other diverse expressions. Pronunciation tends to drop the final consonant of words ending in consonants, so that “Jared” sounds just like “Jerry”. “Th” is often pronounced like a “T”, and so “think” becomes “tink”, and “Thank You” becomes “tank you”. At the end of a word, “th” is often pronounced as an “F” (i.e., ‘truth’ becomes “truf”, and “Ruth” becomes “roof”). Word order is often quite different as well, so that question sentences are phrased differently than in standard English. For example, the question “When did you take the exam?” becomes “What time you took the exam?”. Please speak as much Liberian English as possible! The more you practice, the more local folks will understand you! And feel free to ask lots of questions, most people are happy to help you learn to speak “goo’ English”.

Liberian English Dictionary

Again: still; yet, already. "I can't do that again" (I don't do that any more.) "She was here again" (She was here already.) "She is here again" (She is still here.) "Has she come again?" (Has she come yet?)

Bad heart: evil minded, hateful.

Beg: solicit; plead; a request. "I beg you" (Pleaded) "I begged him" (I pleaded with him.) "He came to me with a beg" (He came to make a request of me.) Many times they will tell you they will hold your foot, that is a very humble type of a beg.

Behind: to run behind, or to be behind one; nag; keep after; insist. "I have to be behind you all the time!" (I have to be after you constantly to make you do it.) "He is running behind me to get some money" (He is nagging me for money.) "He is running behind that woman" (He is chasing after that woman.)

Belly: pregnant. "That woman got belly" (That woman is pregnant.)
Also standard term for stomach.

Be so: Let it be as it is! Or, "Is that so?"

Blouse: Any women's or girl's shirt, even a t-shirt.

Book: to know book; literate. "He knows book" (He is literate.) Still commonly used in the interior. "He knows plenty book" (He has gone to college or studied extensively).

Bossman: Anyone who is the head of something.

Bot up with: Met up with, unexpectedly. "I bot up with him in the market" (I ran into him in the market).

Brother: may refer to any male relative or ward of the family who is of one's own generation. (see also "cousin" "same-parent" "bra" and "ba")

Bug-a-bug: Termite

Burn farm or burn bush: after cutting the bush (or “brushing”-clearing the undergrowth and cutting cutting down trees-a standard part of farming in the interior is to burn the dried debris. This is known in the literature on agriculture as "slash and burn." It appears that the burning off of the previous year's growth destroys the seed of undesirable plants, discourages harmful insects, and provides a degree of natural fertilization to the soil.

Burned: bit; stung. "A snake burned him." "He was burned by a bee."

Bush: forest; secret society groves. "The hunter has gone into the bush." (The hunter is in the forest.) "My daughter has just come from the bush." (My daughter has just been released from secret society.)

Business: matters; concerns. (e.g., “Church business”; "God business"=religion)

Note: “Man Business” usually refers to sex (for a woman); and when talking to a man, “woman business” refers to sex. When talking to a mixed group, you can even use the term “Man and woman business” for simple English for sexual intercourse.

Butter Pear: avocado

Can: do; will. "I cannot eat that." (I don't or won't eat that".) "I cannot lie." (I do not lie. I am no liar.) "I can do that." (I will do that.)

Carry: take; convey. "Carry me to town." (Take me to town.)

Chee-Chee-Polay (or just “CCP”) – Refers to gossip. “What is the chee-chee-polay” (what’s the latest gossip), or “Da just CCP” (that’s just gossip).

Chunk: to throw; to hit. "I will chunk this rock at you." (I will throw this rock at you.) "I will chunk you." (I will hit you.) "He chunk me in the head." (He hit my head.)

Cold water: a gift to soothe ruffled feelings, to appease anger, or to ask forgiveness. (e.g., "Here is cold water to cool your heart.") A common expression borrowed from local African languages and custom.

Come: "I'm coming" may mean "I'm going."

"I'm coming to go" means "I am leaving now."

"I go come" means "I will go now and return."

"I come to see you" is the equivalent of "Hello."

"I come to you" means "I am here." (More likely to imply a specific purpose, a request, an expectation.)

Congo: Technically, this refers to the slaves who were captured from slave traders during transport on the sea and set free, often by delivering them to Monrovia. However, in modern-day Liberian English, “the congo people” refers to Americo-Liberians or their descendants.

Copper: one cent (a copper penny.)

Country: tribal or traditional. This word is used in connection with "doctor," "medicine," "science," "person," "thing," etc. The "country doctor" is a traditional healer—either an herbalist or spiritist. It is the most common means of referring to native or indigenous customs.

Country chop: indigenous West African cuisine.

Craw-craw: a term used for any bad skin condition (often scabies).

Cup: unit of measurement. Usually a cup is a twelve ounce tin can, or sometimes 15 ounce size.

Cut: eat; take one's part; divide. "Come let us cut, man." (Come let us eat together, or Come let us share the food.) Also may mean broken or split. (My shoe is cut.) Or to be wounded. (They cut each other when they were fighting.)

Da-me: It is me.

Da-nat: That is not.

Dash: a tip; a gift. Also a verb: to give something to-dash me. Does imply the word "bribe," sometimes. Also indicates reciprocity, recognition of a favor or service done, or the worth of the person being "dashed." In some tribal languages the term for such a token gift means, literally, "respect." It is an indication of the esteem or satisfaction one has with regard to a person who has rendered a service or who is being asked to do so.

Dear: expensive.

Different-different: varied; many kinds. "In Monrovia, the people are different-different."

Dirt: Trash or garbage; "In Monrovia, there is dirt all in the streets"

Dress or Dress down: Means to move over or make room, scoot over. When you arrive at a bench that is already packed with people, you say "Please dress down small, I beg you." Dress does NOT mean to put on one's clothes—if you are telling someone to "get dressed" you say "wear your clothes now".

Drivers: This term refers to car or bus drivers.

Dry: sickly, undernourished, skinny. "That child is getting dry." Also a colloquialism for being without money-broke. Or it refers to something that is not wet (!).

Dumboy: boiled cassava pounded into a thick, viscous dough. Served in a bowl covered with clear water broth, or squeezed into a ball and dipped into palmoil soup. The term seems to be from Vai, and the dish is served at the many Vai cookshops in Monrovia.

Eat: use up; especially wastefully; embezzle. "Did you eat that money?" "The chief ate the hut taxes."

Ever since: sometime ago: already. "I did that ever since."

Fine: satisfactory; good; beautiful. "That one not so fine."

Too-fine: excellent, wonderful, magnificent.

Finish: done; the end; stop; complete. "The meeting finish." (The meeting is done or over.) "Finish one time!" (Lay off immediately. Or That is the end to the matter.) "The watch finish." (The watch has stopped, or is broken.) "My belt finish breaking." (My belt has worn out at last.) "That man was finish drunk." (That man was completely drunk.) "She is finish ugly." (She is the ugliest woman I have seen.)

Foot: In Liberian English "Foot" refers to the entire lower limb—from hip to toes.

Football: soccer.

For true "o": really; actually; a fact. "For true?" (Is that so?)

For what reason: Why

Fresh cold: the common cold; a runny nose.

Frisky: someone who doesn't show respect; mischievous; naughty; casually immoral. Its meaning varies in different sections of the country. It is widely used.

Fufu: a thick dough made from pounded and fermented cassava. Usually rolled into balls and dipped into soup while eating. Not universally used or liked among the Liberian peoples, and is considered a "foreign" African dish, though it is growing in favor.

Fuss: palaver; problems. "He got plenty fuss." (He is very worried; he has problems.) "No fuss." (Don't fret, or don't bother about it.)

Gaygba or GB; a food made from cassava, like fufu.

Good friend: special friend.

Greens: any leafy vegetable used with oil for "soup and rice."

Ground pea: peanut; ground nut.

Gut-full: stomach is full.

Hand: In Liberian English, "Hand" refers to the entire upper limb, from shoulder to fingers.

Hand-inside: you are involved in the matter, as in: "That stealing business—we know your hand inside", meaning you are involved in stealing.

Hang head: meeting; private talk. "The men are hanging head." (The men are having a meeting, or are talking private matters.) Often used in reference to a palaver, or a special meeting involving important decisions.

Hear: understand. "Can you hear me?" (Do you understand me?) "I hear Vai." (I can understand Vai.)

Heart: liver (usually.) Used in metaphor. "His heart lay down." (He was pleased.) "His heart is white." (He bears only good will.) "His heart is bitter." (He is angry.) "He has good heart." (He is a kind and sympathetic person.)

Help: to do something specific for a person. "Help me" may mean "Give me something."

Hold word: defer judgement; keep one's own council. "I hold word." (I will wait before I decide.)

How da body?: How are you (How is your body, i.e., your health?)?

Humbug: tease; bother; annoy; snafu. "Don't humbug me." (Don't bother me.) "He's full of humbug." (He's all mixed up, or He is an annoying or problematic person.) "Plenty humbug." (A mess.)

Hungry time: a reference to the period before the new rice crop is harvested, and when the rice of the previous year's crop is used up. It is during this period that "hungry food" is eaten.

I'm going now: goodbye.

In the house: privately; within the family. "The matter was settled in the house." When this is said of an important political matter or other issue before a chieftom, it means that the related heads of the major founding, land-owning families solved the problem themselves without recourse to outside advisement or referees. Today, it has come to mean that government officials or courts have been avoided.

Juju: A fetish; something tied around the waist or hung around the neck for treatment of an ailment or protection from evil spirits; often an animal bone, or some object wrapped in string or tape.

Juke: poke, puncture. As with a needle, nail, pin, or stick.

Just now: right away. "I'm going just now."

Kwi: a term widely used among tribal peoples to refer to all foreigners, or those who have come from across the sea. It includes the descendants of Liberian colonists as well as Americans and Europeans. It has also come to be applied to all "civilized" or urban people who dress and behave in a non-African manner.

Lappa: a piece of cloth about two yards in length. It is also a measurement of length for cloth. It is the common attire for women when wrapped about the waist and tucked in as a long skirt.

Last time: before; the other day. "I gave it to you last time."

Let it stay: Forget it! Leave it!

Make-kaye: Make it. "We have to go soon, so make-kaye."

Market: to trade; to sell. Usually expressed as "Make market." Also refers to any place of selling or trading, or any goods intended for exchange. "She carries market in her head tie." (She has things to sell or trade wrapped in her bandana.)

Medicine: an object (fetish) or practice (ritual) intended to control supernatural powers for desired ends. "Medicine" can be "good" or "bad" and can be produced by beings or evil agents.

Mistake: accident; involuntary mishap. "He made mistake." (He fell down and broke his leg, or He failed his examinations, or He wasn't to blame.) Seldom implies avoidable error or personal responsibility.

Money Bus: A small van or minibus; usually cheaper than a taxi; formerly referred to one with two side seats facing inward, but these days commonly refers to a 15 or 18 seat minibus.

Must (pronounced "muh"): shall, will. "He must come." (He shall come.) "You must!" (Will you? or Please do.)

N'mind ya: I'm sorry; don't mind; don't fret. Often used as an expression of comfort (i.e., to someone who is sick) or sympathy (to relatives of someone who has died).

Nothing bad, or No bad news: all's well; O.K. a common response to the question, "How are you keeping?" or "What's the news?"

No-way: impossible; trapped; stuck. "There's no way man."

Ocrum: (pronounced "Oh-Crum"). This came from the French "au current" and means up-to-date, with it, familiar with routines or ways of doing things. Example: "You just coming? Oh, you are not ocrum to the Liberian way of doing things."

One-one: one at a time; separately. "Let us answer one-one."

One-time: right away; immediately. "Come one-time." "He went one-time."

Palaver: fight; argument; trouble. (e.g., "money palaver" or "woman palaver.") Derived from the Spanish word "palabra."

Part: that which belongs to someone. "That be my part country." (That is my country.) "Give me my part." (Give me my share.)

Pass: go. "I will pass that way."

Past all: more than any. "He is tall past all."

Plenty: a lot; many; much. "There be plenty people there."

Pump: A pump is any faucet or hand pump, any source of running water.

Quick-quick: right away, on time, hurry.

Reach: to arrive. "I reached Monrovia yesterday." to be big enough: "The money will reach" means the money will cover all the needed expenses.

Road: any pathway, as distinct from "motorroad" or "train road." "You missed the road" means you went off the path, you got lost.

Runny stomach: diarrhea

Satisfy: to please; make happy; to treat properly. "I am not satisfy." (I am not pleased, or I have not been treated properly.)

Scratch farm: hoeing; preparing the ground for planting; weeding.

Sleep: To spend the night somewhere. "Does that car sleep in the garage?"

Small-small: slowly but surely; a little; somewhat. "Wait small."

Sometime: maybe. "Sometime I will go to Monrovia." "If I come I will bring my sister sometime."

Soon: early. "He will come soon in the morning."

So-so: sort of; something like; rather; second-hand; "He be so-so fat." (He is rather fat.) only: "He has so-so boys in the house" (He only has boy children—no girls).

Stop (to stay somewhere overnight; to live somewhere); "Where you stopping?" (where do you live?).

Stranger: guest. "I come to meet your stranger."

Susu: money cooperative. Term possibly derived from the Yoruba word esusu, widely throughout West Africa.

Too or too much: very. "That one fine too much." (That is very nice.) "It is too big." (It is very big.)

Torch: flashlight

Tote: to carry (a burden.) An old American usage.

Trousers: Pants. The term pants is basically never used here. "Short trousers" is the term for shorts. "Jeans Trousers" = blue jeans. Trousers is used for pants worn by either men or women.

Trying: getting along; so-so. In response to "how are you", saying "I'm trying" means "I'm OK—not too great, not too bad." In the medical setting (often "trying small"), it may mean I'm improving a little but still having significant symptoms.

Vexed: angry

Waste: to throw away; discard. "She waste the water." "He wasted the pencil."

Sometimes, “waste” can mean there is too much of it—“Roast corn waste” means there is too much roasted corn.

What time? (when). What place? (where). For what reason? (why). Liberians usually avoid many of the “question” words like why, where, when, and use these phrases instead.

White heart: a demonstration of good will and respect. "He has a white heart." Also refers to a token of respect such as a gift of a white chicken, a white piece of cloth, a silver coin, etc. Usually presented to a host, an honored guest (stranger), a sacred person, or from a client to a patron.

Who-dat: Who is that? Often the answer is “I da one” (I’m the one)... not a lot of help there, huh?

MEDICAL LIBERIAN ENGLISH:

There are several Liberian English expressions that are useful to understand in the medical setting:

“My skin can be hot” (I have a fever). “His skin was hot too much” (He had a very high fever).

“Runny stomach” (Diarrhea).

“Seeing her time” or “Seeing the moon” or even just “Seeing it” (Having her period). “When last you saw your time?” or “When last you saw it?” (When did have your last menstrual period).

Another term for having a menstrual period is “receiving”. “I can’t receive” means I have amenorrhea.

“Belly” (Pregnancy). “Belly in the tube” (Ectopic pregnancy).

“You born before?” (Have you had a baby before?)

“Water can be coming down from in you?” (Do you have a vaginal discharge)

“My eyes can be turning” (I’m dizzy).

“He got low blood” (He is anemic).

“Typhoid” (Typhoid fever—this term is thrown about very loosely here, and often refers to any serious or prolonged fever).

“Hand pump” (Well which is closed and has a hand pump attached to it).

“My head can be hurting” (I have a headache).

“He be having pressure before?” (Has he ever had high blood pressure?)

“Rheumatism” (any form of arthritis)

“Chronic” (serious). When most Liberians say “my condition is becoming chronic” they mean it’s getting worse, rather than any implication about the time course of symptoms.

“Reducing” = Losing weight

“Putting down cough” = coughing up phlegm or sputum (i.e., “You got cough”; “Yeah”; “You can put it down?”; “Yeah, I can put it down.” “How it looking?” (Pronounced “How ih looky”); “It looking white” (Pronounced “Ih looky why”).

“Drip” = IV fluid (“I went to da hospital and dey gave me quinine drip”)

“Titty water” = breast milk; “Baby can suck?” means “Is the baby nursing well?”. “

Terms referring to the reproductive system can be especially vague and hard to pin down. In my experience medically, most people use the following terms:

“toto” (penis)—kind of a childish term for the penis.

“nut” (also refers to penis)

“nut-seed” (refers to testes)

“Womb” (Uterus). “Mouth of the womb” (Cervix).

“Fish” (Vagina). “Itchy fish” (vaginitis of any kind, esp. yeast infection).

Many Liberians will feel that all significant conditions are symptomatic, and that once symptoms are gone there is no reason to consult the doctor. And so, when a person with high blood pressure develops a headache, they will tell you “the pressure hurting my head”. And when they feel well, even though their pressure may be elevated, they will tell you “the pressure coming down now.”